

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE

SUITE 2320 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301
(202) 225-6371
TTY: (202) 226-4410
<http://www.house.gov/science/welcome.htm>

February 6, 2003

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In the wake of the Shuttle Columbia tragedy, we agree with NASA's decision to promptly constitute both internal and external investigating teams. The external team – known as the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (AIB) and chaired by Admiral Hal Gehman – has already begun its deliberations.

A week after the Challenger accident in 1986, President Reagan appointed the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, chaired by former Secretary of State William P. Rogers. The 13-member Rogers panel included former astronauts, a Nobel Laureate in physics, academic and industry engineers, the long-time editor of *Aviation Week*, a renowned astronomer, and Air Force generals. Other than administrative support staff, there were no NASA employees among the Commission's 50-odd staff members.

The Rogers Commission did a remarkable job in just four months, producing not only an excellent description of the proximate causes of the accident but also a wealth of findings and recommendations on a broad range of relevant topics. The titles of some of the chapters of the Commission's report – "The Contributing Cause of the Accident", "An Accident Rooted in History", "The Silent Safety Program", "Pressures on the System", and "Other Safety Considerations" – give testimony to the range of issues illuminated by Secretary Rogers and the other Commission members.

The basic charge to the AIB is similar to that provided to the Rogers Commission, with one exception. The Rogers' Commission charter provided that:

"The Commission shall be composed of not more than 20 members appointed or designated by the President (Reagan). The members shall be drawn from among distinguished leaders of the government, and the scientific, technical, and management communities".

The President
February 6, 2003
Page Two

The AIB charter states that:

"The Board will conduct activities in accordance with direction from the NASA Administrator ..."

All of the support personnel initially provided to the AIB are senior NASA officials.

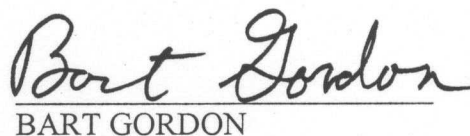
While we commend the openness with which NASA has shared information on the Columbia accident with the public and the Congress, we are concerned that the AIB has the appearance of a non-independent board controlled by NASA. This is in contrast to President Reagan's establishment of the Rogers Commission, which provided for a truly independent, broad-ranging panel.

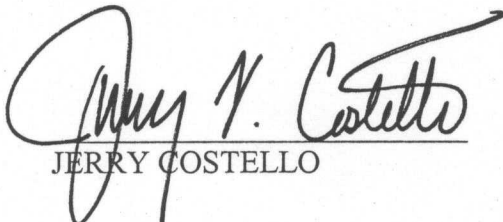
We would respectfully ask that the charter of the AIB be re-drafted to reflect a broad mandate encompassing contributory causes, management issues, and pressures on the system. In addition, we would recommend that, to ensure its complete independence, the AIB should report directly to you and to the Congress and that the support staff for the Board should come from agencies other than NASA. This is not meant in any way to demean the dedication and excellence of NASA's workforce, but to ensure, as President Reagan did 17 years ago, that the AIB would proceed in as unfettered and open a manner as possible. Finally we would suggest that the membership of the AIB be expanded in a manner similar to that of the Rogers Commission, and that Administrator O'Keefe solicit suggestions for new members from key Members of Congress. Mr. O'Keefe has already indicated a willingness to consider Congressional nominations.

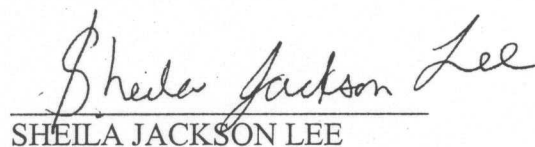
We share your commitment to honoring our fallen astronauts by continuing with a safe, robust national space program.

Sincerely,


RALPH M. HALL


BART GORDON

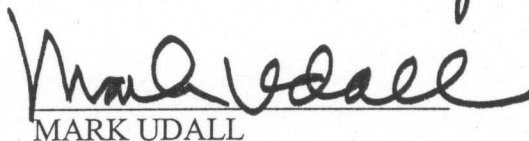

JERRY N. COSTELLO


SHEILA JACKSON LEE

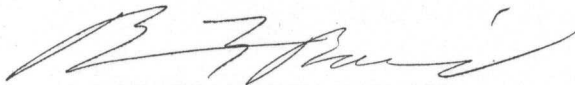
The President
February 6, 2003
Page Three



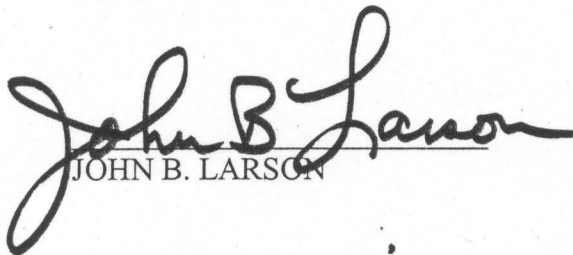
BOB ETHERIDGE



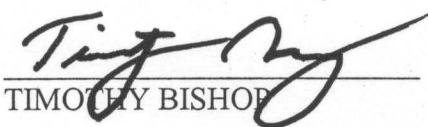
MARK UDALL



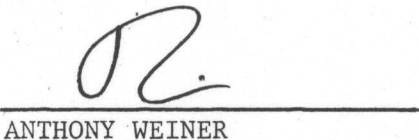
BRIAN BAIRD



JOHN B. LARSON



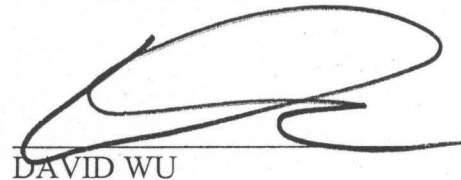
TIMOTHY BISHOP



ANTHONY WEINER



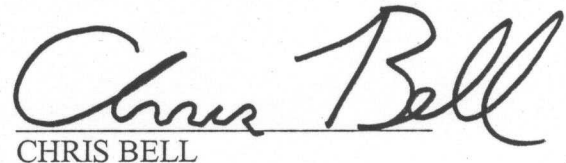
NICK LAMPSON



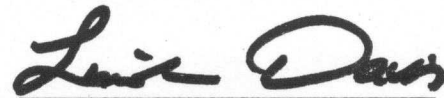
DAVID WU



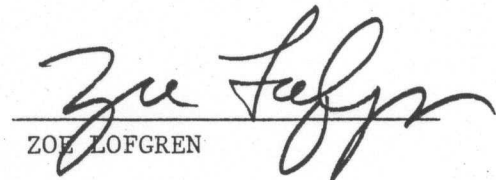
MICHAEL M. HONDA



CHRIS BELL



LINCOLN DAVIS



ZOE LOFGREN